

Part 1: Exiles Who Belong

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We have the privilege of starting a new series today working through the book of 1 Peter. The book is called first Peter, because it is the first of the two letters of Peter we have in scripture. How do we know this? Well because he tells us as much: **1 Peter 1:1a**.

This is the same Peter who was called Simon Peter in the gospels and the same Peter who stumbled and bumbled his way through the gospel accounts as both hero and jester. But there is something timely about this book as we sit not only as 21st Century American Christians, but also as we sit during a building fund campaign, and during an election year.

But before we get into the context of Peter's recipients, I want us to better understand the spiritual heart of Peter himself.

As a disciple, Peter was zealous but also often shortsighted and foolish. In fact he was the one who even had the nerve to rebuke Jesus when Jesus said that he was going to die. And on the eve of Jesus' death, Jesus told his disciples that they are going to run from him when he was arrested. They are going to, in a very real sense, be afraid or ashamed to be associated with this Messiah turned prisoner.

But Peter said, "Lord I will never fall away." Jesus then looked into Peter's zealous eyes and said, "Truly I tell you this very night, you will deny me three times."

John's account follows Peter's story and says later that night it was cold, and some of the guards had made a charcoal fire pit to stay warm outside. It was there huddled around the charcoal fire that Peter was first confronted by someone who asked if he was a follower of Jesus, to which he said, "I am not." It wasn't long after that, around the same fire that Peter denied Jesus twice more before realizing his failure.

What followed was Jesus' crucifixion, and then subsequent resurrection. But John concludes with a story of the resurrected Jesus appearing to seven of the disciples of whom Peter is one. And look at what happens: **John 21:4-9**.

What do you think Peter felt in this moment? When he saw Jesus on the shore, rash and excitable Peter almost drown himself to get to him. And when he got there, what does he smell: a charcoal fire pit. Do you have smells that elicit certain memories?

For Peter, the last time he stood around a fire pit like this, it was riddled with failure. Last time his clothes smelled of this smell he chose to align himself with the crowds and not his Christ. Yet here he is, around a charcoal fire place with the resurrected Lord, and look at what happens: **John 21:15-19**.

Just as Peter failed Jesus three times, three times Jesus recommissions Peter for service to the church. This book was written near the end of Peter's life and is nothing more than an extension of his call to feed God's sheep.

For those who have wrestled with failure, Peter wants to feed you with strength. To those who have felt alone in a crowd, Peter wants to bring you comfort. To those who feel like the circumstances of your life have crippled you at best or damned you at worst, Peter wants to help you experience the grace of Jesus.

You see Peter was one who felt out of place both around the fire the night of the crucifixion and out of place around the fire after the resurrection and the only thing that made sense of his circumstance was the grace that was his in Jesus.

And it was partly because of Peter's own experience in this world that he opened his letter to the churches like this: **1 Peter 1:1-2**.

Depending upon your translation the word used in verse one can either be: exile, stranger, foreigner, alien, or perhaps even another word which stresses a sort of out of place-ness of his reader. Peter is writing to those who, know it or not, are exiles. Or to put it more specifically, elect exiles, chosen strangers.

And in his introduction to his letter he is really setting the framework for what will follow. Peter wants to help the churches to do two things. First he wants them to understand their nature as exiles (**Understanding our nature as exiles**), then he wants them to understand the nature of their exile (**Understanding the nature of our exile**). Meaning he wants them to understand who they are so that they might better understand what in the world is going on in their life.

So our first point today: **Understanding our nature as exiles**.

Peter is writing to Christians, just like you, who feel like something is wrong. Have you ever had a season of life where it seems like something is a bit different, or a bit off, but you're not quite sure what it is?

This is very much the context of the churches to which Peter is writing. As we saw he is writing to churches in five areas of what is now Turkey, and our best guess is that these are churches which Peter's ministry had significant contact with.

And in greeting these churches Peter calls them all: elect exiles, chosen strangers, special aliens. And what Peter is doing is he is giving these churches a vocabulary and an illustration to help them understand the changes they are facing.

As we read Peter's letter you can tell that there is a sense of confusion inside of these churches in regards to how they are being accepted by their own culture.

Now it's interesting because at this point in time there is no official persecution of the church. No one is being forced out of their homes or out of their jobs because of their faith. In a literal sense these people are not exiles, they are not refugees as we think of the word today but this is the title that Peter gives to them in his book.

These believers are facing small, but real, pockets of unease in their community and yet most of them are still in their native or chosen community. So why are they exiles, why do they feel out of place even though they live in their own place?

Well this is Peter's answer to how we become exiles: ***We are chosen by God***. They aren't exiles because they are political refugees or running from a plague, they are exiles because they are God's elect, God's chosen ones.

The gospel is the good news that Jesus did everything required to save sinners and restore us to God. And the moment you repent and you put your faith in Jesus Christ you secretly, subtly but overwhelmingly become an exile in a world which was once so comfortable to you. Conversion puts in back in a world which is the exact same, but a world wherein you are entirely different.

Here's an example. Dave and Caroline Van Matre are members here at the church. They are moving back to their hometown in Pennsylvania here in a week, and in a very real sense they are going back to their homeland. Yet not too long after they arrive they are going to feel like strangers and foreigners. Why? Because they are about to have their first child!

They will be in a place they know so well, and yet this new life makes everything different. They begin to see things they once loved as dangerous, they'll see things that were once boring as wonderful. This is what conversion does to Christians, it keeps us in the same place, but in a very real sense it makes us fully aware of how out of place we are.

Now for these very same churches, within the next five years of their life the Roman Emperor Nero is going to begin an oppressive campaign against Christians. And in times like that they would more likely to see themselves as exiles or strangers. And my guess is that if persecution of such a massive scale happened here in America we too would sober up and understand the insider/outsider nature of conversion.

But what I love about this book is that the churches Peter is writing to are not experience a massive and clearly oppressive persecution. They are experiencing the dissonance and tension between those who are loved and chosen by God through the gospel and those who love the desires and passions of the world.

Peter is writing to those who have an aching feeling of loneliness and opposition, he's writing to those whose friends might now be treating them differently because they are saved, or whose co-workers started acting a little more awkwardly around them after they shared the gospel with them.

And to people with aches like that, Peter says, "It's because you belong to God and not to the world!" For Peter this is the reminder he wants his friends to be greeted with. He wants them to remember that moments of discord in this world are often reminders that we don't belong fully to this world.

Paul makes the point in Romans 8 that even the aches and pains of the physical world, hurricanes, disease, coronavirus, all remind us that the physical world itself is waiting to be redeemed. This world is not the world we were made to be satisfied by. But this also shows up for the believer, and this is Peter's primary theme, in the human cultures that we live in.

In fact what's implicit to Peter's message is that it is precisely because you feel this disconnect that you should take heart. Because what is more to be feared than a lack of belonging to this world is a Christian who feels completely at home in it.

Look at how James puts this: **James 4:4**

If you fail to understand what James and Peter are saying, you will always be frustrated when these tensions arise and you will probably choose the path of least resistance. In a way this is what Peter did that night. Peter chose to try friendship with the world and it left him devastated.

If there were anyone who knew what it was like to feel the weight of being a foreigner and stranger, it was Peter.

But here he writes to us to prepare us for such pressures in our life. Pressures which at times might just be a terse comment from your neighbor when you invite him to church or share the gospel with him. Or it could be something far weightier in this world.

There are scholars in their field who will always be seen as outsiders because of their Christian faith. Politicians who will be stonewalled because of their conversion. There Hindus and Muslims, who upon conversion are disowned and isolated from their families. There are churches in Africa who meet under threat of death. In a very real sense to be chosen by God through salvation is to simultaneously be rejected by the world.

By way of introduction Peter wants to ask you, "Do you really believe that?"

My family had over some refugees from Eritrea once and I was talking with a brother-in-Christ named Desbele. At the time we had two daughters and he and his wife had four. So I asked him what he learned as a father to daughters, what tips he could give me for raising my own.

What he said was the sort of vision correction that Peter wants to give us in this introduction. He looked at me and he said, "You have food and a house for your daughters, you will raise them wonderfully. In Eritrea these things were not so."

I have never felt so estranged in my own backyard. I had in my mind the trials of glitter and teenage hormones, he had in his mind ideas of life and death. And in that moment he came to comfort me with the truth that "You can make it."

Often in our Christian life we get so distracted from the matters of life and death in the gospel that our whole perception of ourselves and our trials are completely out of line. But here Peter corrects our vision. To follow Jesus is at times to feel like nothing more than an exile, a stranger or a refugee. But if you have the gospel, you will make it. You will do wonderfully. You have everything you need.

This is now where Peter begins to teach us what is going on as we live as spiritual refugees. This is our second point today: **Understanding the nature of our Exile**. Read with me once more: **1 Peter 1:1-2**.

Now let's face the music here. If you are not a believer in here today you might be looking at Peter's message and be thinking to yourself: "Why would I ever want to be a Christian? Why would I want to become an exile in a world that could otherwise be my home?"

Well, as we work through this book together I hope you will find a number of reasons, but there are two implicit reasons here in this text which are wonderfully comforting to those who are saved by Jesus Christ.

First he wants us to understand that *In our exile we are never alone*.

Christian or not, you will encounter seasons of life either physically or relationally which are hard and isolating. As much as we love the idea of loyalty in the secular sphere, our world is far more utilitarian with relationships and comfort than we would think. The philosopher Albert Camus even said this about his own relationships: "I used to advertise my loyalty and I don't believe there is a single person I loved that I didn't eventually betray." Loyalty by worldly standards is no guarantee.

But the wonderful news of Peter's message to those who feel confused is that you are not alone. There are entire communities of elect exiles called the church. All across this region are brothers and sisters just like you. This doesn't mean that there will never be betrayal or sin amongst people, but it means that what binds this community together isn't hobbies, interests or utility that can be lost, but a salvation which is given to them by God himself.

The church is not a special interest group for those with nothing better to do on Sundays. The church is not a recent and western oddity. The church is the result of God's saving work to gather his people together as a community of refugees who are commanded to do so by God himself. And when churches gather we create little pictures of our homeland which make us feel a bit safer in a world which seems less so.

The church is an essential encouragement in our own time of cultural exile. It will not do you well to neglect this. The author of Hebrews talks about this spiritual homelessness a lot. And it's from this perspective that he says, **Hebrews 10:24-25**.

We want to be a church where those who are hurting are comforted by those who have hurt. Those who are grieving can receive comfort from those who have grieved, and those who are in need of encouragement can receive it from those who have been encouraged.

But not only do we share this exile with our brothers and sisters in Christ, but God himself has not neglected us in this exile. In fact Peter says that we are elect exiles, in these seasons of sojourning because God the Father has predetermined and foreknown it.

But that's not the end, in the circumstances which God foreknew, he also has given us the sanctification of the Spirit. And the sanctification of the Spirit leads into obedience to Jesus Christ the Son.

There are times when even among our brothers and sisters in Christ that our own feelings of isolation, sorrow and suffering can isolate us and crush us. We live in a world in which the drop of a Tweet or the click of a post can tell you that you don't matter. But when your experience and your externals tell you that you don't matter, Peter here is reminding you that you matter so deeply to the Triune God of the Bible.

The world creates exiles because of the wrong people have done: wrong beliefs, wrong skin color, wrong gender, wrong nationality. But here God brings people into exile precisely because he loves them and because he wants to draw near to them when it seems everything else is falling away.

Where you are at right now is not an arbitrary bi-product of natural history, it is according to the wonderful plan and Triune work of the God who has set forth to save you in Jesus Christ.

John Bunyan was imprisoned for his preaching of the gospel for a large portion of his life and it was in his exile that the nearness of Jesus was most real to him: **I never had in all my life so great an inlet into the Word of God as now; those Scriptures that I saw nothing in before, are made in this place and state to shine upon me; Jesus Christ also was never more real and apparent than now; here I have seen him and felt him indeed.**

Because salvation is a sign of God's sovereign election which we respond to by faith, then we have the promise that God is not unconcerned with us. He is for us in all things.

Which leads us to the second thing Peter wants his people to understand: ***Our exile is never for nothing.***

Look back at **1 Peter 1:2**.

Because God called us to salvation in Jesus Christ, because God has planned and prepared the days of our lives for us, we know that even when we feel more strange, more alone, or more foreign, we are not experiencing these things for nothing.

This is going to be a huge theme in Peter's letter and we will talk more about it next Sunday. But in here is the practical hope that even in the darkest pains of our exile in a broken world, nothing is wasted. God is doing something in us for our good.

This is something that we ought to remember even when it comes to our building fund. As we get more and more information on what it takes to convert a warehouse into a church, numbers begin to climb increasingly higher. And I begin to get anxious and I think, what if the city didn't buy our land? What if some outside donor funded this whole project? What if I could avoid all the weight of this process?

My hope is that one day we will move past this season. But here Peter has a better hope, and that's that God is accomplishing something in us during this season. None of this is wasted in our church.

And Peter here tells us what is being accomplished: in our trials we are set apart by the Holy Spirit (that's what sanctification means) and why are we being more set apart? So that we might obey Jesus more faithfully.

This is the exact point Paul himself made in **Romans 8:28-29**.

The lie that Christians must learn to reject is that similarity with the world is our greatest comfort. Don't we so often want just that: we want a house like the world, a sex life like the world, and a reputation like the world? But both Peter and Paul make it so clear that it is Christ-likeness which is our greatest comfort in this world.

This seems so counter-intuitive. God in his wisdom made us intelligent creatures. And as part of that intelligence we are wired to stop doing things when those things become painful.

So if parts of the Christian life begin to produce pain either due to the brokenness of our world or the brokenness of those around us, wouldn't it make sense that our natural reflex to such sensations would be to stop obeying?

If it was obedience in evangelism, obedience in salvation, obedience in honesty which got me into this mess you will want to stop. Unless you understand that the obedience to Jesus is not apart from the sprinkling of his blood.

Our life as elect exiles leads us into places where the Spirit will set you apart for obedience to Jesus and as a result of his sprinkled blood.

This is an odd metaphor, but its Peter drawing from his Jewish roots here. It was not only the sprinkling of blood which set apart priests in service to the Lord (something Peter will apply to us in chapter 2). But the sprinkling of blood was also the act of covenant cleansing in the Old Testament.

To have been sprinkled by Jesus blood is to be reminded that Jesus' substitutionary work on the cross has taken care of your biggest problem: sin. Jesus died for your sin so that you don't have to fear the world in the same way anymore. You have been cleansed, chosen, elected by his perfect work which means you have been spared from the greatest exile: eternal separation from God in judgment.

You see this world will make you an exile but this world can do nothing to save you from your exile. But look at what John says: **1 John 2:15-17**. Every time we are confronted with the weight of our exile we are reminded that Jesus has freed us from the love of things which won't last. He's freed us from comfort which crumbles and delight which destroys.

Isn't that amazing news? That even when it seems nothing is going according to plan, God is working his plan in our lives to call us more and more into Christlikeness. Now you might say that this is all ridiculous. But the cross proves that God really works like this.

For any casual observer the cross was the most catastrophic failure and rejection the world could ever know. But it was in that moment where Jesus took on our exile for sin in our place where God was drawing nearest to his people.

I'm so excited for this book because it hits us where we are in terms of the building fund, in terms of our growing post-Christian city, in terms of our fears in evangelism and the present anxieties in our country.

We will experience so many things in this world but if we understand that God's salvation has made us elect exiles and that he has promised to work for our good even in the most difficult circumstances, then we will make it. And along the way we will find the joy of helping others and experiencing a greater love of God while we are at it.